CELL-PHONE TOUR: NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART EAST BUILDING

Introduction by Earl A. Powell III, Director of the National Gallery of Art

TRANSCRIPT: Hello, I'm Rusty Powell, Director of the National Gallery of Art, and I welcome you to the East Building Cell-Phone Tour. Joining me today as we discuss the building and a few works of art located in the open spaces of the atrium are curators Leah Dickerman and Molly Donovan.

To take the tour, look for the red cell-phone symbol next to a label and press the number followed by the pound (#) key. You may enter another object number followed by pound (#) at any time to hear about another artwork.

For instructions, press the star (*) key.

We ask that you please not use your speaker phone and that you turn off your cell-phone ringers while in the gallery.

To leave a comment about the cell-phone tour, press zero pound (0 #).

Enjoy the tour.

East Building
I. M. Pei, architect

TRANSCRIPT: The original building of the National Gallery of Art–what we now call the West Building–opened at Sixth Street and Constitution Avenue in 1941. Even at that time, there was an awareness that the nation's art collection would eventually require a second building. Almost thirty years later the Gallery enlisted I. M. Pei to design the East Building at Fourth and Constitution, and it opened to the public in 1978. At the twentieth-anniversary celebration for the building, Pei reflected back on the problem of how to harmonize the two very different structures:

> I.M. Pei: I think that the challenge, and a very difficult one, was how to do it, how to make the West Building and the East Building look comfortable together. Architecturally, they're forty years apart, and a neoclassic style by John Russell Pope–by the way, I think that is one of the finest neoclassic

> buildings we have in America, and it's by the finest architect of that period. So I was very much aware of that challenge.

Pei met the challenge, to be sure. To give the two buildings a similar color and tonality, he used marble from the same quarry that had supplied the building stone for the 1941 structure. He also aligned the façade of the new building with that of the West Building so that they face each other with a certain kinship across the Fourth Street Plaza.

While the façade of the East Building is symmetrical, one of the first things that strikes you upon entering is its tremendous asymmetry. There is hardly a right angle to be found. Pei based the design on the trapezoid of land that the building occupies at the intersection of Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue. He divided the trapezoid into two triangular units that sit back to back in a scheme that ties the building into its site.

For the second stop on the tour, please head toward the Calder mobile at the center of the atrium.

Alexander Calder
Untitled, 1976

TRANSCRIPT: Here we are at the center of the atrium, looking up at Alexander Calder's 76-foot-long mobile, *Untitled*, which he made in 1976. In commissioning the East Building, the Board of Trustees imagined a space that would be filled with modern art, and they commissioned works from some of the most celebrated artists of the moment. Not surprisingly, they tapped Alexander Calder, who had become well known in the twenties and thirties for making kinetic sculpture filled with humor. *Untitled* was one of Calder's largest works, and it was also one of his last, completed only a few weeks before he died. One of the really extraordinary things about this mobile is that while it weighs nearly 1,000 pounds, it moves ever so lightly, powered only by currents of air. In 1998, I. M. Pei recalled how he and J. Carter Brown, then director of the Gallery, dealt with the problem of getting the large mobile to move.

> I. M. Pei: When Carter and I visited Mr. Calder–Sandy Calder–in Sachet, he took us to a ship-building factory to show us a piece of the sculpture, and it was very heavy looking, you know, because it was made by a shipyard and pieces were so heavy. And we said, "How is it going to move when it's so heavy?" and Mr. Calder shook his head and said, "Well, I don't know. These people know." That was it. Then Carter and I came back, I think you remember, we were very worried about it. We said, "This piece will not move!" in spite of what Sandy Calder said. Carter's roommate happened to be Paul Matisse, Henri Matisse's grandson, and he's also a wonderful conceptual engineer, and he made it out of–what do you call these–egg crates. The piece today that you see is made by Paul Matisse, not by the shipyard in Sachet.

Andy Goldsworthy
Roof, 2004—2005

TRANSCRIPT: British artist Andy Goldsworthy and his team of dry-stone wallers constructed this sculpture here on the ground level of the East Building during the winter of 2004/2005. The concept of *Roof* stems in part from Goldsworthy's interest in Washington building stones and the quarries that supply them, as well as from his long-time engagement with a particular form–the dome. This form has shown up in Goldsworthy's work since the 1970s. What's clear too is his fascination with its recurrence in natural and manmade structures, from dome-shaped hills to neolithic burial chambers and even to the buildings that surround us today. What we have here are nine hollow domes of stacked slate, each about human height and twenty-seven feet in diameter. They are at the opposite end of the spectrum from the structures Goldsworthy makes from perishable materials–ice or leaves or snow. Yet for all its gravity and permanence, *Roof* has an almost fluid quality, even flowing into the building at two surprising moments.

Be sure to go up to the mezzanine to view the installation from another vantage point, and see the surprise Goldsworthy has in store for you. Walk just beyond Tony Smith's sculpture *Die*, toward the wall of windows. There you'll get a bird's-eye view of *Roof*, especially of the oculi, the velvety black openings at the top of each dome. This view offers the primary reason for Goldsworthy's domical structure–he knew that the northern orientation of the site would produce perfectly black holes. From that perspective, *Roof* looks like whirlpools at the top of an eddy, and we're almost willing to believe that Goldsworthy is an alchemist, having turned 550 tons of slate into water.

David Smith
Circle I, II and III, 1962

TRANSCRIPT: You are looking at–or perhaps through–David Smith's *Circle 1*, *Circle 2*, and *Circle 3*, all of which were made in 1962. David Smith's *Circle Series* is a good example of the modern era's break with traditional sculptural processes of casting and carving and molding. During the 1930s and 1940s sculptors began to configure work in a new additive way that involved gluing or welding parts together. Picking up on this new approach, David Smith developed a practice in the forties that was based on welding, and he carried this forward in work, such as the *Circle Series*, that he made late in his career. In the fields at Bolton Landing, Smith's farm in upstate New York, he would set the circles one behind the other, so that you could look through one circle and see the apertures of all the others nestled inside of it, giving the impression of moving into the distance.

One of the really interesting things about the *Circle Series* is the degree to which Smith takes on painting itself as a topic. Traditionally, modern sculpture is unpainted so it will show the marks of its making and the materials that were used, but the circles are all highly colored in a range of pinks and oranges and reds. Also, modern sculpture is usually seen in the round and doesn't project a keen sense of front and back. The circles are strongly planar, and that puts the viewer in a specific situation in looking at them. In a sense, looking through the first aperture at these receding circles evokes the terms of traditional perspective.

So it's almost as if the artist has asked himself the question, "How might painting be imagined in three-dimensional space?"

Max Ernst
Capricorn, model 1948, cast 1975

TRANSCRIPT: Look at the array of decidedly strange but fixating figures in front of us. It won't come as a surprise that *Capricorn*'s creator, Max Ernst, was at the center of the Dada and Surrealist movements in Europe early in his career. We can view this sculpture as a portrait of the major themes Ernst worked with throughout his career: birds, horned kings, collaged monsters, and hybrid male and female figures. Like many contemporary artists, Ernst was well-acquainted with ancient and tribal arts. He brings some of this into play with the quasi-cycladic female figure at the right (at least her top half), and the staff at the left that was based on a tribal house post in the artist's own collection.

The model for this freestanding sculpture, Ernst's largest, was made in 1948 from both found objects and sculpted form. It was cast in 1975. When the German-born artist came to the United States in 1941 and settled eventually in Sedona, Arizona, his wife named their home Capricorn Hill.

Ellsworth Kelly
Color Panels for a Large Wall, 1978

TRANSCRIPT: *Color Panels for a Large Wall* is among Ellsworth Kelly's most expansive color grids, with eighteen panels, each a single hue, and no two hues alike. This gargantuan 1978 work is based on paintings that Kelly did in the 1950s, in which he began with a grid of predetermined modular units, then made each one of those units a separate color (which he often took from color-sample books), and finally organized the colored panels using chance. Kelly's panels challenge traditional notions about painting, especially the idea that color creates an illusion of space, or that there's a relationship between what we call figure and what we call ground, where some colors seem to come forward in a composition and other colors seem to recede. The grids that Kelly deployed have no foreground, no background. Instead color is imagined as an object in space.

This work was originally shown at the Cincinnati Central Trust Company, and the eighteen panels were arranged as two rows of nine. But Kelly imagined this work to be site-specific, seen in relationship to the architecture around it. So when it came to the National Gallery, the artist reorganized it and stacked it differently. Here the work takes up so much space that it almost can't be grasped in its entirety; it actually exceeds one's vision–and that's the idea Kelly wanted to convey in this installation.

Richard Serra
Five Plates, Two Poles, 1971

TRANSCRIPT: Richard Serra's *Five Plates, Two Poles* of 1971 undoes all of our expectations for what a traditional sculpture would be. Traditional sculpture is figurative, it sits on a pedestal that separates its space from our own, and it's usually made of a precious material. In contrast, *Five Plates, Two Poles* is insistently abstract. It sits in a very blatant way in our own space. And not only is it not made of a precious material, it's made of an industrial one: hot rolled steel.

When Serra began working in the late sixties, he began to explore a sculptural vocabulary that existed outside of the traditional processes of carving and molding or welding. And instead he made his own list of alternative verbs that included propping, throwing, scattering–and from there he began to experiment with different sculptural forms that might result from these actions. His work for the National Gallery comes out of a series of "prop" pieces in which plates of heavy metal and poles are literally held in place by each other. There's never any welding in this work; it's all a very careful balancing act, as you'll see if you make your way slowly around *Five Plates, Two Poles*. You see these heavy plates, larger than you, that are balanced with the suggestion–just the suggestion–that they could possibly fall. In fact it's absolutely safe and secure, but the work makes you think about gravity, and it hints at danger and maybe even your own vulnerability in front of it.

Take a moment and go up to the atrium and look at it from above. The plates touch at the most delicate intersections. Serra's sculpture is constructed using the same kind of riggers and steel erectors that are used to build skyscrapers. When a [construction] team came here to install the piece, they all spoke about how much they admired Serra's work. They were real fans. For them he was someone who understood their materials and methods, and who employed them in a virtuoso way. It's the stuff of our cities and of our modern age.

Five Plates, Two Poles was made about the same time as Pei's building–two works by two modern masters employing asymmetrical forms. And now that their work has been brought together in the same arena, it's hard not to think about the angles of the sculpture resonating with the angles of the building and vice-versa.

Sol LeWitt
Wall Drawing No. 681, C.1993

TRANSCRIPT: The first thing to know about Sol LeWitt's exuberantly colored *Wall Drawing No. 681 C* is that, for LeWitt, it was all about the idea. The underlying concept of a work of art was of great importance to him, more so than the physical object, which could be as permanent or temporary as the owner wanted it to be. To own a LeWitt wall drawing is to own, in essence, a diagram of the work and a certificate signed by the artist with his instructions for executing the drawing. The drawing doesn't assume physical form until draftsmen carry out the instructions.

When the Gallery acquired *Wall Drawing No. 681 C in 1993*, two of the artist's studio assistants completed the work LeWitt described this way: a wall divided vertically into four equal squares, separated and bordered by black bands. Within each square, bands in one of four directions, each with color ink washes superimposed. The texture in the color bands was achieved by applying multiple layers of color ink washes, using ink-soaked cloths rubbed in a circular motion. For all LeWitt's emphasis on concept, the drawings themselves are visually striking.

Lewitt developed a system of wall drawings beginning in the late 1960s. They occupy a unique place as works of art: they precede their physical embodiment, and survive their own demise. For once made, they can be painted out and remade in the same or a new location. As LeWitt wrote in 1970, "the wall drawing is a permanent installation, until destroyed."

Rachel Whiteread
Ghost, 1990

TRANSCRIPT: You're looking at Rachel Whiteread's *Ghost* from 1990, a breakthrough work in which the artist creates a positive from a negative. Whiteread has made casts of the interior walls of a Victorian parlor and presents the air space–the void of the parlor–almost as a solid volume, complete with detailed impressions of everything the air in that room pressed up against. Walk around the sculpture. You'll encounter the impression left by a fireplace complete with soot, a sash window surrounded by molding, a doorknob and keyholes, and finally the flat plane of a solid wall. You'll notice crown molding around the top of the sculpture, and about a foot down from that, the impression of the picture rails. The skirting boards around the base make the work seem like it's set on a pedestal, like a traditional sculpture.

Whiteread has said of this sculpture that she was trying to "mummify the air in the room" hence the title *Ghost*. The piece accordingly conjures up death and remembrance, and even has a mausoleum-like effect. Yet it's inherently a positive form made of immaterial space, both a living space and a shelter for the dead. In fact opposites like these conjoin to make *Ghost* the powerful work that it is: a work simultaneously about presence and absence, interior and exterior, concision and complexity. *Ghost* is also a work about place: it resonates with the architecture of the East Building and the neoclassical silhouette of the West Building seen through the windows just beyond it.

Tony Smith
Die, model 1962, fabricated 1968

TRANSCRIPT: Tony Smith's *Die* is a work that was conceived in the early sixties, and it's really a radical piece that had a profound influence on the following generations of artists. Usually a sculpture refers to something outside of itself–the human figure, or an artistic monument, or the act of making–but here with *Die* we have a simple six-foot steel cube that's slightly raised from its base, and that's it.

Smith said that the fabrication was inspired by an ad he saw for the industrial welding company in Newark, New Jersey. Their logo was "You specify it, we fabricate it" and he specified a six-foot cube. So there's nothing here to suggest that *Die* is a piece about artistic genius or traditional notions of inspired making.

What Smith does with this piece is to bring the human body back into contemporary sculpture, but he does so in a new and unusual way. The six-foot cube has a reference to human scale, to Leonardo's famous drawing of *The Vitruvian Man*. If the sculpture were any bigger, it would be a monument, Smith said; any smaller, and it would be just an object.

At the same time that it refers to human size, however, it impedes the viewer's vision–you can't see around the work as you can with most traditional sculpture. And in this way *Die* insists on a direct confrontation with the viewer. Even the title seems to confront us head on, with its oversized if ambiguous references to mortality and chance. We can understand the title as a reference to industry, in the sense of die casting. Or we can understand it to refer to one die from a pair of dice. Or we can understand it to refer to death. Smith made this telling comment about the work: "six-foot box, six-foot under."

Martin Puryear
Lever No. 3, 1989

TRANSCRIPT: Here with Martin Puryear's *Lever No. 3* we have an abstract form that evokes both the man-made and the organic. Created in 1989, the work is essentially a long curved extension attached to a base. It calls to mind an antique hand tool used for woodworking, just as its title would suggest. Yet another association is clearly to an animal form–with a small loop of a head at the end of an elongated neck. The elegance of *Lever No. 3* draws in large part from this sweeping appendage, which measures more than seven feet long. It may surprise you to learn that the entire sculpture is constructed from stacked layers of ponderosa pine that have been glued together, cut with a band saw, and then carved and shaved. If you look closely, you can actually see the natural grain of the wood and the sculpture's stratified structure through the thin black paint that covers it.

The hand-made quality of this and much of Puryear's work relates in a fundamental way to the traditions of woodworking. In this specific piece, the reference is to the tribal wooden sculpture of Sierra Leone that Puryear saw while serving there in the Peace Corps in the mid-1960s.